

American Dental Association Council on Ethics, Bylaws and Judicial Affairs

The following information is intended to assist dental licensure candidates, as well as examiners and educators involved in the testing process, in recognizing ethical considerations when patients are part of the clinical licensure process.

Background: Dental licensure is intended to ensure that only qualified individuals are licensed to provide dental treatment to the public. Most licensing jurisdictions have three general requirements: an educational requirement-graduation from a dental education program accredited by the Commission on Dental Accreditation; a written (theoretical) examination-to determine whether the applicant has achieved the theoretical bases at a level of competence that protects the health, welfare and safety of the public; and a clinical examination in which a candidate demonstrates the clinical knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to safely practice dentistry.

Anecdotal information and experiences reported in the literature by licensees and educators have raised ethical considerations when human subjects/patients are used in the examination process.¹⁻⁶ While others disagree, it is recognized that the profession must ensure that the welfare of patients is safeguarded in every step of the clinical licensure examination process.⁷

The licensure examination process is evolving. Many clinical examination agencies continue to monitor developments for applicability and affordability of alternatives to human subjects/patients in providing valid and reliable assessment of clinical competence.

The ADA has voiced its position regarding the use of human subjects/patients in clinical examinations through a series of resolutions culminating with the adoption of the 2005 House of Delegates' Resolution 20H-2005.⁸⁻¹⁰ This resolution reaffirms ADA support for the elimination of human subjects/patients in the clinical licensure examination process while giving exception to a more recent methodology for testing known as the curriculum-integrated format (CIF). The 2006 ADA House of Delegates directed the ADA Council on Dental Education and Licensure to develop a definition of CIF and present it to the 2007 House of Delegates. The 2007 House adopted the following definition (1H:2007):

Curriculum Integrated Format: An initial clinical licensure process that provides candidates an opportunity to successfully complete an independent "third party" clinical assessment prior to graduation from a dental education program accredited by the ADA Commission on Dental Accreditation.

If such a process includes patient care as part of the assessment, it should be performed by candidates on patients of record, whenever possible, within an appropriately sequenced treatment plan. The competencies assessed by the clinical examining agency should be selected components of current dental education program curricula.

All portions of this assessment are available at multiple times within each institution during dental school to ensure that patient care is accomplished within an appropriate treatment plan and to allow candidates to remediate and retake any portions of the assessment which they have not successfully completed.

Given that currently there are no new technologies that completely eliminate the use of human subjects/patients in the clinical examination processes, the ADA Council on Ethics, Bylaws and Judicial Affairs (CEBJA)¹¹ called on major stakeholders, including the ADA's Council on Dental Education and Licensure (CDEL), to provide input for the development of a statement that would identify key ethical considerations and provide guidance to help ensure the welfare of the patient remains paramount.

Ethical Considerations When Using Human Subjects/Patients in the Examination Process

1. Soliciting and Selecting Patients: The ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct¹² (ADA Code), Section 3, Principle: Beneficence states that the "dentist's primary obligation is service to the patient" and to provide "competent and timely delivery of dental care within the bounds of clinical circumstances presented by the patient, with due consideration given to the needs, desires and values of the patient." The current examination processes require candidates to perform restorative and periodontal treatments on patients. In light of the principle stated above, this may create an ethical dilemma for the candidate when seeking patients to sit for the exam. Candidates should refrain from the following:
 1. Reimbursements between candidates and patients in excess of that which would be considered reasonable (remuneration for travel, lodging and meals).
 2. Remuneration for acquiring patients between licensure applicants.
 3. Utilizing patient brokering companies.
 4. Delaying treatment beyond that which would be considered acceptable in a typical treatment plan (e.g. delaying treatment of a carious lesion for 24 months).

2. Patient Involvement and Consent: The ADA Code, Section 1, Principle: Patient Autonomy states that "the dentist's primary obligations include involving patients in treatment decisions in a meaningful way, with due consideration being given to the patient's needs, desires and abilities." Candidates and dental examiners support patient involvement in the clinical examination process by having a written consent form that minimally contains the following basic elements:
 1. A statement that the patient is a participant in a clinical licensure examination, that the candidate is not a licensed dentist, a description of the procedures to be followed and an explanation that the care received might not be complete.
 2. A description of any reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts to the patient.
 3. A description of any benefits to the patient or to others which may reasonably be expected as a result of participation.
 4. A disclosure of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to the patient.
 5. An explanation of whom to contact for answers to pertinent questions about the care received.
 6. A statement that participation is voluntary and that the patient may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the patient is otherwise entitled.

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3. Patient Care: The ADA Code, Section 3, Principle: Beneficence states that the dentist has a “duty to promote the patient’s welfare.” Candidates can do this by ensuring that the interests of their patient are of primary importance while taking the exam. Examiners contribute to this by ensuring that candidates are adequately monitored during the exam process such that the following treatment does not occur:
 1. Unnecessary treatment of incipient caries.
 2. Unnecessary patient discomfort.
 3. Unnecessarily delaying examination and treatment during the test.

4. Follow-Up Treatment: The ADA Code, Section 2, Principle: Nonmaleficence states that “professionals have a duty to protect the patient from harm.” To ensure that the patient’s oral health is not jeopardized in the event that he/she requires follow-up care, candidates and dental examiners should make certain that the patient receives the following:
 1. A clear explanation of what treatment was performed as well as what follow-up care may be necessary.
 2. Contact information for pain management.
 3. Complete referral information for patients in need of additional dental care.
 4. Complete follow-up care ensured by the mechanism established by the testing agency to address care given during the examination that may need additional attention.

Sources:

1. Dr. Lloyd A. George Nov. 3, 2005 Letter to Dr. James W. Antoon, chair CEBJA
2. CEBJA March 2, 2006 Strategic Issue Discussion – Use of Patients in Clinical Licensure Examinations
3. Richard R. Ranney, D.D.S., et al., “A Survey of Deans and ADEA Activities on Dental Licensure Issues” Journal of Dental Education, October 2003
4. Allan J. Formicola, D.D.S., et al., “Banning Live Patients as Test Subjects on Licensing Examinations,” Journal of Dental Education, May 2002
5. “The Agenda for Change,” Objectives Developed at the Invitational Conference for Dental Clinical Testing Agencies by representatives of the clinical testing agencies and other organizations with an interest in dental licensure sponsored by the American Dental Association. It is considered informational and does not represent policy of the ADA. March 4, 1997
6. ASDA Resolution 202RC-2005, Revision of Policy L-1 Initial Licensure Pathways
7. Position Statement of the American Association of Dental Examiners in Response to ADA Resolution 64H, Oct. 12, 2001
8. ADA HOD Resolution 34-2006, Definition of Curriculum Integrated Format
9. ADA HOD Resolution 20H-2005, Elimination of the Use of Human Subjects in Clinical Licensure/Board Examinations
10. ADA House of Delegates (HOD) Resolution 64H-2000, Elimination of the Use of Human Subjects in Clinical Licensing/Board Examinations
11. CEBJA is the ADA agency responsible for providing guidance and advice and for formulating and disseminating materials on ethical and professional conduct in the practice and promotion of dentistry.
12. The entire text of the ADA Principles of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct can be found on the ADA website at www.ada.org.